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9 November 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Comments on the Current Drafts of the Introductory Note  
and Text of National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-67

1. Having studied the Viet Cong manpower problem since early 1966, and discussed various drafts of NIE 14.3-67 for what seems almost as long, I wish to make the following comments as a matter of permanent record. They are my views and not necessarily those of my office.

The Introductory Note

2. The first paragraph of the current draft of the introductory note to NIE 14.3-67 states that "our initial understanding of Communist capabilities in Vietnam had, of necessity, to rely" on GVN data, and that "our information has improved substantially in the past year." Both statements, although factually correct, are misleading because of facts omitted.

3. While it is true that our first understanding of Communist capabilities was derived from GVN data, we continued to rely on it well past the initial phases of our military involvement in South Vietnam. By mid-1962, the number of U.S. military advisors in South Vietnam exceeded 10,000. The massive commitment of American infantry began in March 1965. Yet:

a. The U.S. intelligence community conducted no research on the size of the Viet Cong irregular structure between early 1962 -- when MACV J-2 estimated there were 100,000 guerrillas and militiamen -- and September 1966.

b. The U.S. intelligence community conducted no research on the size of the Viet Cong political apparatus until

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late 1966.

c. The U.S. intelligence community conducted only rudimentary and incomplete research on the strength of the Viet Cong military support structure before this year.

4. It is also factually accurate to say that "our information has substantially improved in the past year." It is a misleading statement in that it tends to obscure the fact that the quantum improvement in intelligence occurred not in 1967 but in the latter half of 1965 and during 1966, as U.S. forces began to capture large numbers of enemy documents. Strength studies compiled in 1966 based on materials captured in 1965 and 1966 came to essentially the same conclusions as current strength studies. In fact, since the earlier studies usually listed numbers higher than those in the present NIE, they were probably closer to the truth. I cite the following examples:

a. A "Draft Working Paper" (which I wrote) dated 8 September 1966, suggesting that the number of Viet Cong irregulars carried in the MACV Order of Battle should be at least doubled.\* The paper was based on captured documents, the latest of which was released on 29 July 1966.

b. An unpublished MACV study, the existence of which was surfaced in Hawaii in February 1967, based almost entirely on data of earlier years, which indicated there were 198,000 Viet Cong irregulars -- 13,000 more than carried in a draft MACV study on irregulars dated 1 September 1967. The earlier study is probably that more accurate.

c. An unpublished DDI study (which I wrote) suggesting the number of Viet Cong irregulars in 1966 was between 250 - 300,000. The study was completed in late 1966, and contained 83 footnotes, most citing one or more captured documents, the latest of which was published on 10 December 1966. The study was never published, for the stated reason that MACV was itself about to publish a study on irregulars.\*\*

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\* This memorandum prompted MACV to review its irregular holdings.

\*\* As of this writing, MACV has not done so.

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d. An informal CIA study of January 1967 -- based on 1966 documents and population statistics -- estimating the Viet Cong had 304,000 irregulars as of August 1966. Shortly after the completion of the study, a captured Viet Cong document was published which indicated that the enemy had 330,000 irregulars in early 1966.

e. A MACV study, the existence of which was surfaced at Honolulu in February 1967, based on 1966 data, which indicated the Viet Cong political infrastructure had some 90,000 members.

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Specific Comments on the Text

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OB expert, for example, speculated in August 1967 that the table of organization for the Viet Cong administrative service structure -- as currently defined -- could allow for as many as 100,000 persons.\*

8. Paragraph 30 contains a sentence which says that certain VC documents which asserted there were 170 - 180,000 guerrillas in early 1966 were "almost certainly exaggerated." Although I have seen no direct evidence indicating that Viet Cong hamlet and village officials falsify returns -- on the contrary, a long association with VC documents convinces me that their personnel records are essentially honest -- it is probable that certain VC functionaries, for self-aggrandizement, inflate strength figures.\*\* While it is possible, therefore, that the 170 - 180,000 figure is inflated, the extent of the exaggeration, if any, is far from clear. Since I tend to accept VC personnel accounting procedures and their definition of "guerrillas," I feel that the exaggeration is probably not great.

9. The problems I have with the assertion that the 170,000 - 180,000 figures are "almost certainly exaggerated" bears directly on an estimate, made later in paragraph 30 that the strength of guerrillas is now 70 - 90,000. Having spent several months over the last year studying guerrillas and having had a part in persuading MACV to raise its guerrilla figure from 65,000 in September to the present range I do not feel that 90,000 is realistic as the range's upper end. The reason for my lack of confidence in the 90,000 maximum is that I believe available evidence does not necessarily support as sharp a dropoff in guerrilla strength as the NIE seems to indicate. In viewing the questions, one can make a number of assumptions, of which two follow:

a. First, that the strength listed in documents was not exaggerated and that there were 170,000 guerrillas in early 1966. If this was so, and the current strength is 70 - 90,000, then there has been a decline in the number of guerrillas of from 47% to 59%.

\* The actual strength of such units would of course be below the TO/E strength. The question, of course, is how much. Viet Cong infantry units, for example, are believed to be at about 70% of TO/E.

\*\* It can also be argued that some VC bureaucrats, to forestall hierarchical calls for the upgrading of local manpower, deflate strength figures. A COSVN-level document of early 1966 indicated that the competition for manpower between the various regions was fierce.

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b. Second, that the strength listed in the document was exaggerated and that there were, say, 150,000 guerrillas in early 1966. If this was so, and the current strength is 70 - 90,000, then there has been a decline in the number of guerrillas of from 40 - 53%.

10. Although the decline may have been this precipitous, there is a body of evidence suggesting it was not. First, according to GVN figures, the VC population base decline during approximately the same period by only 31%;\* and there is little evidence to demonstrate that the Viet Cong are less efficient now than in early 1966 in the extracting guerrillas from their population base. It can be argued, in fact, that they are more efficient, since a disproportionately large number of people leaving VC areas are children, old men, and old women, who are not normally recruited as guerrillas. Second, Viet Cong documents suggest that since late 1966 the Communists have been making major efforts to check the decline in guerrilla strength, redress the balance between the regular and irregular forces. The practical effect of such a decision, if carried out, would be to lower the rate at which guerrillas are upgraded -- thus cutting down on one of the major drains on guerrilla strength.

11. Finally, a recently published COSVN-level document, almost certainly written in early 1967, opens the possibility that as of that date the Viet Cong had some 150,000 guerrillas.\*\* The relevant passage in the document is by no means straightforward and is certainly open to questions of interpretation and of reliability. It states that the U.S. "pacification plan failed because they could not annihilate 150,000 guerrilla soldiers . . ." Apparently a lesson plan for instruction to be given by a high-level political staff officer, the document elsewhere exaggerates Allied losses (in common with most other VC documents) and VC successes, and obviously contains a large measure of VC propaganda. In this regard, however, the document resembles other VC documents which suggest a figure of 170 - 180,000

\* From 3,358,000 in December 1965 to 2,312,000 in August 1967. Extrapolations from two VC documents, one which showed the VC thought they controlled 5 million people in early 1966, and another which suggested that they lost an additional 440,000 in the second and third quarters of the year, suggest that the present VC-controlled population (using their criteria for control) is now in the neighborhood of 3 1/2 million people: a decline, therefore, of 30% since early 1966.

\*\* MACV Translation Report 03-1499-67, 20 September 1967, page 10.

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guerrillas in early 1966. These documents are cited in, but not necessarily accepted by, the NIE. Whatever its faults, I do not think this latest document can be disregarded. My own opinion is that 150,000 is plausible as an estimate of the number of guerrillas in early 1967.

25X1 12. [ ] stated in a cable dated 3 November 1967 that he thought the upper end of the guerrilla range "should be raised considerably on the high side." On balance, I believe the maximum number of guerrillas should be raised to at least 120,000.

13. Paragraph 31 states that the number of members of the political infrastructure is "large," but refrains from making even a minimum estimate of the infrastructure's overall size. A numerical estimate was foregone partly because a MACV range of 75 - 85,000 as the number of VC political cadre in South Vietnam omitted large numbers of full-time Viet Cong civil servants serving at district level and above. Although I would hesitate to estimate the overall strength of the infrastructure, I believe the evidence warrants a statement that there are at least 100,000. Most military and civilian analysts who have worked on the size of the political infrastructure would probably agree that there are at least this many.

14. Paragraph 35, which discusses the Viet Cong Assault Youths, asserts that "little information is available to indicate (their) strength or distribution. . . ." Having written the first memorandum (unpublished) in February 1967 calling the attention of the MACV Order of Battle branch to the existence of the Assault Youths, and having kept watch on the evidence concerning the Assault Youths since then, I believe it is unwarranted to assert that there is only "little" evidence on their strength and whereabouts. The amount of such evidence is substantial -- it includes several documents from the COSVN Assault Youth Command, extensive records from Viet Cong Region V, and a number of district and province Assault Youth rosters: not, by any means, a complete picture, but one that is as good as that for other types of Viet Cong organizations. The problem concerning the size of the Assault Youth force is not a lack of information, but an absence of research.

15. Paragraph 36 states that "current evidence does not enable us to estimate the present size of (the self defense and secret self defense forces, among others) with . . . confidence." While true, a similar assertion could be made about any set of numbers concerning the Viet Cong. Estimates of the size of these forces -- probably as good as other estimates made in the NIE -- were put forward by MACV J-2 in a draft study dated September 1967.

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MACV then felt there were about 100,000 in the self defense forces, and 20,000 in the secret self defense forces. I see no analytical reason why these estimates cannot be included in the current draft of the NIE, and have little sympathy with the political reasons which apparently led to their dismissal from the NIE.

16. Paragraph 39, and particularly Table 4 which supports paragraph 39, are virtually meaningless, since they compute logistic requirements for NVA and VC "regular" and "administrative support" forces only. Neither the table nor the text makes any estimate of the food consumed by guerrillas, political cadres, Assault Youths, or civilian laborers serving away from home. Since they probably eat as much per capita as the regulars and support troops,\* since they may number over 100,000 (say, 50,000 political cadres, 30,000 village guerrillas, and 30,000-odd Assault Youths and civilian laborers), and since food accounts for 80% of the Communists' "daily logistical resupply requirements," their omission from logistical computations seems difficult to understand. I am aware that the overall subject of Viet Cong logistics is complex. I do not feel, however, that the subject is made any more comprehensible by a table and text which discuss only those materials and that food used by half of the Viet Cong organization.

17. Paragraph 55 asserts that the "average monthly recruitment probably falls within the range of 3,000 to 5,000 men per month for the Main Forces, the Local Forces and the guerrillas." Those who have read the evidence on which this assertion is based believe the range is questionable. Work in progress on an in-depth CIA study suggests the monthly recruitment rate may be in excess of the 3,000 - 5,000 range used in the estimate.

#### General Comments on the Text

18. I see no reason to dwell at length on why I think the current draft of the NIE is an inadequate piece of analytical work. I will make four points, briefly.

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\* Table 4 computes food requirements on the basis of 118,000 "regulars" and "35 - 40,000" administrative service troops. If both categories are on the low side, as is probable, the amount of food they consume is also underestimated.

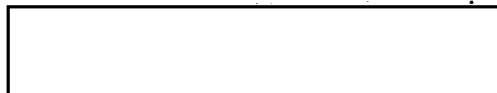
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19. First, the current draft is ill-formed and incoherent. Discussions of logistics, losses, and manpower are largely unrelated.

20. Second, the draft is less than candid. It conceals rather than edifies, using such devices as the phrase "at least" to obscure the possible existence of tens of thousands of Viet Cong soldiers. Too often, it attempts to blame evidence as inadequate, when the fault is not in information but in analysis.

21. Third, the draft is timid. Its history is one of attacks by soldiers and politicians, and retreats by intelligence officials. Rather than admit the extent of past underestimates of enemy strength, its authors hide behind disclaimers and refuse to add up numbers, while protesting that it is inadvisable to make sums of apples and oranges.

22. Finally, it is unwise. Although it intimates that there are "considerable" numbers besides the "at least 223,000 - 248,000" (listed in paragraph 37), it does not come to grips with the probability that the number of Viet Cong, as currently defined, is something over half a million. Thus, it makes canyons of gaps, and encourages self delusion.



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